The myth of violence in Late Antique Egypt:

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Abstract:

Part of a larger systematic study of religious violence in Late Antique Egypt (4th-7th centuries CE), this project seeks to discredit the commonly accepted idea of widespread Christian violence against the ancient religions in this time period by examining the fate of the temples in the Dakhleh Oasis in Egypt's Western Desert. The objective is to show that, despite the common motif of anti-'pagan' violence in Christian literature, the violent destruction of Egyptian temples is rarely supported by archaeology. This case study focuses on understanding the end of the temples in the regional context of the Dakhleh Oasis. The research consists of an analysis of conference proceedings, field reports, and personal papers published by or in association with the Dakhleh Oasis Project, a group of archaeologists and scientists excavating in the Oasis since 1978 who have made the Oasis into one of the best excavated sites of Egypt. This study is relevant to our understanding of the complexity of religious violence and as such also has relevance for the study of the phenomenon today.

Introduction:

The end of the "pagan" temples in Egypt in the Late Antique period (4th – 7th centuries CE) is a fascinating period of history. While much of the surviving literature from this period tells of fanatic violence by the Christians towards the traditional temples, the extant writings are mostly Christian works and their portrayal of religious violence seems to have been more of a literary motif than an accurate representation of reality. To ascertain the legitimacy of this hypothesis, several case studies were necessary. As one of these case studies, this project, then, studied the chronological relationship between the decline of traditional Egyptian religions and the rise in Christianity in the Dakhleh Oasis in Egypt's Western desert to discover if there was any evidence of violence or instead evidence of the two religions living peacefully side-by-side.

Methodology:

This project mainly focused on archaeological evidence by examining a myriad of publications by the Dakhleh Oasis Project, a group excavating in the Dakhleh Oasis since 1978, as well as papers from the individual excavators at the site. The goal was determine end dates for temples in the Oasis and to investigate any possible Christian violence towards the temples. As such, the dates of the construction of churches and/or conversion of existing buildings into churches has relevance. Ancient literary sources were not consulted, except in the case that the location of their find was beneficial for dating a particular structure, because of the previously proposed bias towards a violent motif.

Results:

"Pagan" Temple	End Date
Temple of Tutu, Ismant el Kharab	Early fourth century
Temple of Thoth, Amheida	Before the fourth century
Deir el-Haggar (Amon Re)	After the second century.
Temple of Seth, Mut el-Kharab	Survived into the second century.
Temple of Amun Nakht, Ayn Birbiyeh	Unknown

Christian Church	Construction/ conversion date
Small East Church, Ismant el-Kharab	After 306-312.
Large East Church, Ismant el Kharab	After 313-318.
West Church, Ismant el-Kharab	In the fourth century
Church complex, Ain el-Gedida	First third of the fourth.
Church, Dayr Abu Matta	Fourth-fifth century

None of the temples in the Dakhleh Oasis showed evidence of Christian violence. It fact, as apparent in the above diagram, it seems that the temples began fading out of use even towards the end of the Roman Period, before widespread Christianity was attested in the archaeological record in the Oasis. It is important to note that the end of the temples does not necessarily imply the complete end of the traditional religions, instead it could mark a move from the official, codified religion towards a more personal, domestic type of religiosity. Van Zoest and Kaper note that "evidence from more than one of these religions has appeared together in several houses of Kellis" (modern Ismant el-Kharab) which implies a gradual and peaceful move from the old traditional religions towards Christianity. Also of interest is the fact that the ancient temples were reused in Dakhleh, much as elsewhere in Egypt (Dijkstra, in press).

Ismant el-Kharab:

A particular example of the reuse of old temples is seen in Ismant el-Kharab: Shrine I in the Temple of Tutu was reused as a donkey stable and as a domestic space as early as the mid to late fourth century. (Thanheiser and Konig; Hope, 2001) This provides a *terminus ante quem* for the end of that temple as a cult center. The appearance of the priest Stonois in papyri suggests that the temple was functioning until 355 CE, but this may only suggest the presence of a Tutu cult in Ismant el-Kharab, and not the functioning of the temple. Finally, the Small East Church was remodeled from an existing building, and the nearby Large East Church was purpose built as the Christians outgrew their first place of worship (Bowen, 2004; 2012a). Curiously, the entire "site [of Ismant el-Kharab] was abandoned at the end of the fourth century" for some as of yet unknown reason (Hope, 2001).

The Small East Church in Ismant el-Kharab

Relief Sculpture from the temple at Ayn Birbiyeh

The temple of Thoth at Amheida is also particularly interesting. Like Ismant el-Kharab, the site of Amheida is thought to have been abandoned towards the end of the fourth century. The exact end date of the temple remains unknown, but the discovery of Christian Coptic graffiti inside the temple indicates that the temple must have been abandoned somewhat before the abandonment of the site as a whole to have allowed Christians this opportunity (Bagnall and Cribiore). The presumed temple Ain el-Gedida also shows domestic reuse, not as a stable, but as a ceramics workshop (Bagnall and Cribiore, Aravecchia). According to Dixneuf, the Christian Church here was built "during the first third of the fourth century" and was abandoned within the century (Aravecchia). Bowen suggests that the temple of Seth at Mut was later the site of a Christian Church (2012), but further excavation is necessary to reveal any details. Further excavation and dating is necessary to provide dates for the end of other temples in the Oasis with any level of accuracy.

Conclusion:

Since the precise end date of many of the temples in the Dakhleh Oasis is not known, it is difficult to paint an exact picture of the relationship between Christianity and the traditional religions in this period. However, even from the approximate dates published at this point, it is apparent that the use of the temples by the "pagan" religions was seriously declining by the end of the fourth century CE, at which point Christianity had already become significantly widespread in the Oasis. This change in religious belief does not seem to have resulted in violence since, in at least two cases, the temples were repurposed as domestic spaces, and the surviving temples which are damaged show signs of climate damage but few traces of human destruction. It seems, then, that, in the Dakhleh Oasis, the Christian violence which typified the contemporary literature was not an accurate representation of reality. This requires an entirely new examination of the history and origin of modern violence in Egypt.

Temple at Deir el-Haggar

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*Map courtesy of the Geographic, Statistical and Government Information Center, University of Ottawa.

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